

# The Rules You Live by: Clarifying Beliefs and Values in the Classroom

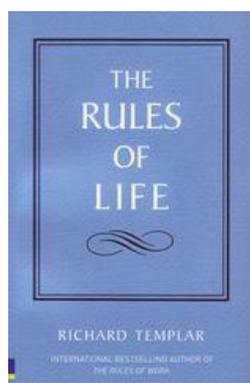
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## Introduction

In the book *The Rules of Life*, Richard Templar offers lots of good advice and ‘rules’ about how to live life well. He describes the book as a personal code for living a better, happier, and more successful kind of life. Some typical ‘rules’ that he gives in the book include: “Accept what is done is done” and “Dedicate your life to something.”



While Templar has many useful ideas, perhaps a better idea than merely accepting such prescriptions is for people to explore and craft rules with which they personally identify. Rules are, after all, contextual and, given the diversity that exists from one person to another, positing a single set of rules meant to apply to everyone seems a doomed endeavor. Rather than accepting someone else’s rules, it would seem to be more important to find your own rules in life.

This paper discusses how the development of autonomous, critical, and reflective thinking can be nurtured through an enjoyable classroom learning activity called *The Rules of Life* which facilitates the learner driven formulation of personal rules of life.

## The nature of rules

We all have rules by which we govern our life. We are just not always aware of these rules. For example, when you put on a shirt or a jacket, you probably always follow the same routine. For me, I always put the left arm in first, but in order to figure that out, I really had to imagine doing it and actually move my arms. For putting on shoes, it is similar. We do these things every single day by a particular set of personal rules, and yet often we are unaware of what these rules actually are.

It seems a little strange, doesn't it? We follow these rules every single day and yet we are not really aware of them. Why? This happens because they have become automatic or unconscious behaviors. When you were a little boy or little girl, putting on your jacket or shoes was probably a little bit more difficult. If you don't remember, ask your mother or father because I'm sure that they had to help you.

When you did learn how to put on your shoes, at first it was a very conscious process. You had to think about each step carefully so that you didn't make a mistake. But your brain is efficient and as you became better at this action, it became automatic and you didn't have to think about it consciously anymore. Over time, it had become an automatic behavior. As language teachers, we know this is also true for learning a second language. What Ellis (2002) says in regard to language learning is true for every aspect of our behaviors: "Automaticity is the performance of a skill without conscious control. It results from the graduated process of proceduralization."

This automation of processes is a very useful thing because it forms the basis of what we usually think of as learning. Let's take another example to illustrate this point. When you are learning to ride a bicycle, at the beginning it takes all of your conscious attention. Later on, when you eventually learn to ride the bicycle automatically, you can use your conscious attention to do other things at the same time. For example, you can ride along avoiding pedestrians, and still manage to hold an umbrella and talk on your phone at the same time. In other words, your bicycle riding is now so automatic that you can use your attention for other things.

### **Automated beliefs**

It is not only everyday behaviors that become automatic and unconscious. It is also our beliefs. Our everyday decisions and beliefs are primarily enacted unconsciously. Sigmund Freud was one of the first to recognize the distinction between our conscious and unconscious minds and is said to have used the metaphor, "The mind is like an iceberg, it floats with one-seventh of its bulk above water".

Most of our beliefs are unconscious and automated and entered our minds when we were much younger. As children, we were shaped by the culture of our families and later by the culture of society. For example, in Japan it was traditionally believed that women should be *otonashii* (quiet, reserved) while men should be *majime* (serious). So, women should be good listeners and take care of people around them, while men should take their work extremely seriously and support their family. Since childhood, these expectations have been part of the social and cultural framework that surrounds Japanese people. As a result, for most people they have become unconscious beliefs.

Some of our unconscious beliefs are useful, while others are much less useful. For example, in modern society, women have much more freedom to work and to choose a way of life of their own choosing. Men also have an increased ability to focus on leisure time or family and to not place work at the center of their lives. Our unconscious beliefs can become outdated because of changes in society or context. They were suited to another time but are no longer useful.

We are living our lives by unconscious rules. These rules that we aren't even aware of are often inappropriate to the fast-changing modern world. Here, we are not talking about external rules of school or workplace or society. We are talking about the internal rules that we unconsciously live our lives by. But before we look at internal rules, it is useful to consider how rules from external sources influence us.

### **Rules from external sources (Exogenous)**

Exogenous rules are those that come from outside ourselves, in contrast to endogenous rules which come from within ourselves. It is rare that an individual suffers from a shortage of exogenous rules.

These rules include the prescriptions of authority figures and those of the groups, organizations, and societies to which we belong. Rules about wearing bowling shoes in a bowling alley are not life changing, but they do serve a purpose. The more regularly intoned an exogenous rule is, the more likely it is to be both somehow counterintuitive and perceived as important to the efficient functioning of the collective vis a vis its mutually agreed upon goals. In essence, such rules help us to better live in society with others.

As discussed in the introduction of this paper, Richard Templar's book offers a list of exogenous rules. Many other books and websites also make their own suggestions. Some reach 2,000 years into the past to draw from the Bible, some into the 18<sup>th</sup> century to intone George Washington (republished as Washington, 2014), and others are much more recent including Belleau (2015). Some offer "healthful living based on modern science" (Fisher, 2015), others tell us how to become a better person (Sol, 2016), and others offer us the "grand claim of being principles for a better life" (White, 2010). Doubtless, these books all offer useful tips and advice, yet being exogeneous they cannot take account of the context of any specific individual's life or beliefs.

Based simply on the amount of publications addressing the topic, it can reasonably be assumed that composing rules for others to follow is a relatively undemanding task. Yet it also seems clear that adhering to such rules is nowhere near as simple.

Rules that fail to produce behaviors in accord with them are less *rules* than they are *suggestions*. For a suggestion to become a rule, it must be connected at a deeper level to an individual's beliefs. We don't necessarily have to be fond of the rule for it to affect us. Even though we may not believe that jaywalking constitutes an ethical violation, we likely do believe that being arrested is an outcome best avoided. Thus, when there is a reasonable likelihood of being caught, our behavior is that of non-jaywalkers. Exogenous rules are powerful only to the extent that the endogenous rules to which they are connected make them so. Let us turn now to where the true power lies.

### **Importance of internal rules (Endogenous)**

It is useful to remember that the distinction between endogenous and exogenous rules is a blurry one at best. As evidenced by our earlier Japanese culture-based examples, the expectations of a socio-cultural system have power only to the extent that they are internalized by the people inhabiting that system. And the flow of 'rules' goes both ways. Individual behaviors inform collective behavioral heuristics which, in turn, guide individual behaviors. But this does not mean either that 1) it is impossible to identify whether a given heuristic should be primarily attributed to external or internal influences, or 2) that the self-perpetuating, two-way flow between these two realms is impervious to intervention.

Let us consider the example of telling lies. Though most adults likely have the sense that deliberately lying is an unethical thing to do, during a certain period of childhood development lying serves an important purpose. It is one of the ways that children develop a theory of mind, coming to understand that they may know things others do not (Kegan, 1982). In addition to supporting our earlier assertion that rules are contextual, this example can be extended to demonstrate how exogenous rules can transform into endogenous ones. The act of telling a lie undergoes multiple interpretations being, first, ethically acceptable due to its developmental utility; second, avoided due to its potential for incurring punishment (an exogenous iteration); and, third, internalized as an act that is by nature distasteful (an endogenous one). Different people engaged with different contexts during different times in their lives may experience the same rule as originating largely externally or internally to themselves. An individual's ruleset is an ongoing process rather than an assortment of fixed values.

So, it is possible to recognize a given rule as being, in a given context at a given time, primarily endogenous or exogenous. Of course, the experience of contemplating that given rule is, in itself, powerful evidence in determining the rule's origin. But one might also inquire as to the frequency with which the rule in question is made explicit. Those subject to regular reiteration, such as the stop signs one encounters while driving, are unlikely to be endogenous for most people. The activity explored by this paper reverses this correlation asking that endogenous rules be made explicit. Doing so offers a number of benefits.

### **Value of making rules explicit**

While changing rules that are primarily exogenous is possible, the in-common society-based nature of such rules makes the process much more time and resource intensive. Endogenous rules, on the other hand, regardless of whether they were always endogenous or became so through internalization are much more, though still not readily, pliable--that is, assuming they can be correctly identified. Even if changing these rules is not the motivating goal, it is advisable to make them explicit on a regular basis so both their merits and flaws can be properly considered. If knowing what software you are running on your computer is common sense, how much more should it be the case for the programs operating in your mind?

Other benefits that explicating one's rules offers regardless of whether there is a desire to make changes are those of participation and strengthened internal locus-of-control. To look at just one area of research, the field of organizational development has long been aware that getting the best out of people means getting them involved in making decisions that affect them (Weisbord, 2012). When a team collaboratively determines its own success criteria, its members feel a responsibility and an ownership for both those criteria and the efforts made in satisfying them. The same dynamic can be found at the level of an individual operating in a group or society. Imposed rules are, by their nature, dehumanizing and alienating. Inclusion in the process of rule formulating, on the other hand, humanizes people and, ultimately, leads to increased adherence to those rules. And, as a rule, empowering rules produce better outcomes and adherence than do disempowering ones. As teachers, one of our goals is always to encourage learner autonomy because the learner is only in our classroom for a limited period of time (Najeeb, 2013). Becoming consciously aware of beliefs about learning can be a powerful impetus to students to begin to recognize and utilize the many learning resources around them. Gaining an awareness of our unconscious beliefs is one of the simplest and most powerful ways of achieving this kind of autonomy all through our lives.

We can also consider this issue from the perspective of where people locate their sense of control. According to Fournier (2016), locus of control is "The extent to which people believe they have power over events in their lives. A person with an internal locus of control believes that he or she can influence events and their outcomes, while someone with an external locus of control blames outside forces for everything." A strong internal locus of control (LOC) correlates with outcomes such as better academic performance and professional attainment. Pannells & Claxton (2008) explored the relationship between happiness, creative ideation, and locus of control and demonstrated that happiness also positively correlates with a strong internal locus of control. Clearly, gaining awareness of our own beliefs and a stronger internal LOC is a useful thing in life.

Of course, an overdeveloped internal LOC can lead to odd and potentially maladaptive conclusions. An example would be believing one's pattern of negative thoughts to be the cause of an earthquake. So, it is necessary to strike a balance between an internal and external LOC or, more specifically, to identify when either is more or less appropriate. Though natural disasters need not be attributed to negative thinking, the rules each of us choose to guide our behavior certainly are primarily subject to

an internal LOC. Thus, recognizing this offers both the benefits of greater achievement through empowerment and a more accurate understanding of how the world truly functions.

Another positive effect of endogenous rule explication is the reflection on self and resulting improvements in self-awareness it engenders. In order to identify the rules one already follows, an exploration of behaviors, beliefs, and even values is required. This alone should help a person to identify incoherencies or ways in which slippage over time has resulted in misalignments. Implicit in the question ‘what are your Rules of Life?’ are the related questions ‘what do you want those rules to be?’ and, perhaps, more to the point, ‘what kind of person do you want to be?’ Thus, the process encapsulates reflection, identification, and (re)design, though not necessarily in that (or any) order. It synthesizes the questions of where we are and where we would like to be, requiring honesty and supporting aspiration. If exogenous rules are intended to help us live with others, endogenous ones do more to help us live with ourselves. Given the power and pervasiveness of our relationship to ourselves, it is only sensible to make clear the rules that will optimize it. Setting personal rules is an explicit self-statement of our values. It offers a greater understanding of our own limitation, a doorway into exploring and tweaking our own identity constructively, and where appropriate facilitates the possibility of positive behavioral/cognitive change.

### **The study**

We designed *The Rules of Life* activity as a simple way for students to bring unconscious beliefs into awareness, while also providing a useful and intrinsically motivating language learning activity. We carried out the activity with learners at three institutions in Japan: a private women’s university (n=46), a public university (n=60), and a national university (n=15). More details and visual examples of the activity are described in Cullen & Roth (2017). The basic procedure is given below.

*Step 1:* We elicited some of the rules of the school or classroom from the learners. We used these to show the common grammatical structure of rules, e.g. “Listen to the teacher” (imperative) or “You must wear a uniform” (positive modal verb). Rules of life should be written positively, so if any of the school rules were stated negatively, we elicited from the learners how they could be rewritten positively. For example, “You should not leave the classroom without permission” could be rewritten as “Ask the teacher for permission if you want to leave the classroom.”

*Step 2:* We explored the idea that these school rules were made by someone else and that societies create many rules for us in every area of life. We then suggested that, while these rules are important, we can also make rules for our own lives. We provided one or more of prepared examples to inspire learners, e.g. “Always learn from mistakes.”

*Step 3:* We provided learners with this prompt: “What rules will help you to have a happy and successful life?”

*Step 4:* Learners worked alone for about 5 minutes to write 3-6 rules for their life.

*Step 5:* Learners share some of their rules in pairs, groups, or whole-class.

*Step 6:* We introduced the idea of logos and identified some famous logos.

*Step 7:* The learners designed a logo to represent each of their rules.

*Step 8:* The learners combined their logos to *create* a composite ‘Life Logo’.

*Step 9:* The learners wrote essays and made presentations sharing their rules and ‘Life Logo’ in groups. They explained each rule and its logo. Then they showed how they had combined the logos into a “Life Logo.”

*Step 10:* The learners completed reflection-style questions. These questions were

What did you learn from the Rules of Life activity?

Were you able to make your unconscious beliefs conscious?

## Results and analysis

We carried out a basic thematic analysis of the student essays following Braun and Clarke’s (2006) six-step method. The ten most common themes that emerged are shown in order of descending frequency in the table below along with some learner quotes.

Keyword/Topic	Student example(s)
1. Think positively	“think positively”, “do not be afraid of changes”, “laugh a lot”
2. Take care of health	“No mobile phone 30 minutes before bed”, “get enough sleep”
3. Challenge yourself	“Don’t say negative things”, “don’t limit what I can do”, “study other languages”, “believe in myself”, “try new things”
4. Keep learning	“Try everything”, “adopt new things”, “challenge a lot of things”,
5. Smile	“Practice smiling”, “laugh a lot”, “keep smiling always”,
6. Take time to relax	“Don’t push myself too hard”, “sleep when I’m having a hard time”, “spend time thinking about nothing”, “take a good rest”
7. Have goals	“Have a purpose”, “challenge a lot of things”,
8. Manage time well	“Sleep early, wake up early”, “do things efficiently”, “don’t watch TV before tests”
9. Be true to yourself	“Be obedient to myself”, “have confidence in my ideas”, “don’t regret what I decided”, “believe in myself”
10. Have good manners	“Don’t use vulgar language”, “be grateful to my parents”, “greet people”, “say please and thank you”

Other keywords and themes that emerged prominently in the students’ work included:

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• do my best</li> <li>• work hard</li> <li>• don't be afraid of mistakes</li> <li>• be open to others' views</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• be kind</li> <li>• be honest</li> <li>• speak politely</li> <li>• show gratitude</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• keep promises</li> <li>• write a diary</li> <li>• be prepared/ready</li> <li>• do things</li> </ul>
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<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• greet people</li> <li>• never give up</li> <li>• eat well</li> <li>• sleep</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• no regrets</li> <li>• money management</li> <li>• enjoy life</li> <li>• keep calm</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• you feel good about</li> <li>• try things</li> <li>• laugh</li> <li>• accept change</li> <li>• exercise</li> </ul>
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In considering the emergent themes, one point of interest is how the most common also seem to be the most general. Many of the other rule themes could be classified as variations, sub-categories, or examples of the three most common. Examples of this include the relationship between themes such as ‘sleep enough,’ ‘eat well,’ or ‘exercise’ and ‘taking care of health’ or that between ‘keep learning’ or ‘have goals’ and ‘challenge yourself.’

It is no coincidence that the top three themes (positivity, health, challenge) are less beliefs than injunctive formulations of values. Valuing positivity translates readily into the rule ‘think positively.’ What this suggests is that, through the course of the activity, the learners were able to access and express something deeper than their unconscious beliefs. They went down to the bedrock of their values.

Other trends that these themes reveal are the degree to which very culturally specific rules or social expectations are taken on as self-enforced. The clearest example of this is the prevalence of themes such as ‘smile,’ ‘have good manners,’ ‘greet people,’ and ‘speak politely.’ In part due to its Confucian lineage, Japan is a country that values the rituals of the commonplace. There are opening and closing ceremonies for the most minor of events. This includes workdays, meals, and interactions between individuals. The great value of interacting according to the exacting rules of propriety is that others are spared the distress of dealing with the unexpected. It is not strange, then, in the context of Japan for these learners to have identified ‘keep smiling always’ and ‘greet people’ not only as being endogenous in nature, but as qualifying for inclusion among the three such rules most worthy of recognition and expression. As a finding, this is unsurprising. But it does have the potential to add some detail and color to the cultural outlines drawn by studies employing less textured data sets. It also suggests that one would uncover a very different set of rules in a society functioning some cultural distance from Japan.

**Learner reflections**

One of the premises of this activity is that it can help learners to make explicit and clear beliefs which were previously unconscious and/or poorly formulated. As explained earlier, this offers benefits such as greater motivation to follow these rules, development of the internal LOC, and improved self-awareness with respect both to strengths and weaknesses. In order to ascertain whether learners found the activity useful and whether it helped to bring unconscious beliefs to consciousness, we asked a subset of the learners (n=15) to provide written answers to two questions. The questions and some representative responses are shown in Table 1.

*Table 1. Learner Reflections on the Activity*

1. What did you learn from the Rules of Life activity?	2. Were you able to make your unconscious beliefs conscious?
I found that important things is hard to see.	I can make my beliefs clear. so I will create the poster similar to this homework, when I lost sight of something important.
If I want to change myself, It is not easy to do because my past thinking restrict me.	Yes, I could think deeply about my habit of the way of thinking.
We often do things unconsciously. Although when we become aware of our existing beliefs, we consciously create new personal rules that we decide to live our lives by.	Yes, I become aware of my unconscious beliefs.
I did learn 3 things; what I have done so far, what I want to do now, what I should do from now on.	Yes. I can see my life poster everyday. So I can do self-reflection to make my unconscious beliefs conscious.
“...I realized what really important to me. what i should concentrate on to make profit in my life... And i also enjoyed presentation of another students, they were really interesting.”	

These examples confirm our hypothesis that an activity like *The Rules of Life* can bring the learners into more direct contact with important aspects of themselves that had previously been either unencountered or unrecognized. They also include a number of claims regarding plans for ongoing use of the activities outcomes which can be seen as evidence of behavioral change due to increased awareness of previously unconscious beliefs.

## Conclusion

The use of this activity need not be limited to EFL/ESL classrooms and, with appropriate adaptations, can be employed in a wide range of educational settings. Overall, it was well-received by the learners who engaged with it. For educators who want to encourage learner autonomy, cooperative engagement, and/or reflective practice, our findings suggest that it offers something of value. Our experiences suggest that learners appreciate the opportunity to think about their own lives in a structured way and that they show more motivation towards (language) learning with this kind of personalized activity.

## Recommendations

One final trend worth noting is the difficulty the students had in responding to the reflective questions- in particular the one which asked whether they had made any unconscious beliefs conscious. The likely reasons include

- 1) the difficulty of translating this question into the students' native language in a way that properly conveys its meaning, and
- 2) a lack of comfort engaging in meta-cognitive activities of this sort.

That a combination of these two was encountered is both likely and more than sufficient as an explanation. It is recommended that, prior to employing *The Rules of Life* activity, the learners be provided with careful scaffolding to help them develop an understanding of the necessary concepts and become acclimatized to the style of engagement required.

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